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## Against Molinism: A Refutation of William Lane Craig's Molinism

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**Against Molinism:  
A Refutation of William Lane Craig's  
Molinism**

Daniel T. Clemons

**The Problem We Face**

Why is there pain? This has been one of the major problems to occupy Christians. In fact, this problem has haunted both Christians and Jews as far back as the oldest books of the Hebrew canon. One attempt to resolve the problem has been to postulate that there is some good that may outweigh the evil in the world. Perhaps it is to God's glory that evil exists. After all, without evil how could great goods such as sacrificial love, grace, and mercy, exist?

A common candidate for such a "greater good" has been human freedom. However, not just any freedom will do. The sort of freedom called for is libertarian freedom. The kind of freedom that knows no sovereign save the person to whom it belongs. Traditionally, Christians have thought of God as the being who created the world "in the beginning" from nothing. Likewise, libertarian Christians assert that man, in the act of choosing and exercising his will, has an

analogous creative ability as a byproduct of being made in the image of God. Many Christians think of this as a great good that could be used to outweigh the problem of evil. However, some Christians have questioned whether God could truly be said to be in control of the world, or sovereign in providence, if man's freedom to choose limits God's control.

Is it possible to simultaneously assert God's sovereign providence over every detail in creation and man's freedom, in the libertarian sense, without a contradiction? The Jesuit theologian, Luis de Molina, thought it was possible. Several contemporary Molinist philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, William Lane Craig, and Thomas P. Flint argue on similar lines. Molinism (named after Molina) is a theory which poses a plausible scenario to reconcile divine omniscience and providence with free creaturely choices. In this paper, the argument will be made that Molinism, specifically Craig's take on Molinism, is unnecessary and fails as a reconciliatory theory. First, Molinism is an unnecessary theory because libertarian freedom, one of Molinism's starting presuppositions, is an incoherent concept. Second, Molinism fails as a reconciliatory theory because libertarian freedom is logically incompatible with the Molinist system itself.

### **Defining the Terms**

Before jumping into the argument of this paper, we will need good working definitions of the relevant terms. First, with respect to providence, in a radio broadcasted debate with Paul Helm, William Lane Craig made the following

assertion:

The Molinist has this very, very strong sense of divine sovereignty and *meticulous* providence.... If [Luis Molina] were living today I [Craig] think he would say that the tiniest motion of a sub-atomic particle cannot occur but without God's direct will or permission. So, this is a very strong view of divine sovereignty and control.<sup>1</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Craig seems to assert, both here and elsewhere, that his definition of providence is very similar to the Augustinian, Thomist, and Reformed understandings of providence.<sup>2</sup> So now we will examine how this Reformed tradition defines divine providence. In *What About Free Will?* the reformed thinker Scott Christensen defines divine sovereignty in providence as “The biblical doctrine that God controls time, space, and history. Calvinists usually hold that God *meticulously* determines all events that transpire, *including human choices.*”<sup>3</sup> Also, Molinist philosopher Thomas Flint writes:

Many of the more ardent defenders of providence, from Reformed thinkers such as Calvin, Leibniz, and Jonathan Edwards to Thomists such as Domingo Banez and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, clearly belong in [the Compatibilist traditionalist] camp, while many others, including such giants as Augustine and Aquinas, might also (though more controversially) be situated [in the same camp]. Compatibilist traditionalists insist that God, as first cause, is the ultimate causal determiner of all that takes place. As compatibilists, such theists insist that the efficacy of divine decrees is not inconsistent with genuine human

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<sup>1</sup> Justin Brierley, “Calvinism vs Molinism,” *Premier Christian Radio – Unbelievable?*, recorded January 4, 2014, <<https://www.premierchristianradio.com/shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/episodes/calvinism-vs-Molinism-william-lane-craig-paul-helm-unbelievable>>.

<sup>2</sup> For sake of brevity, this Compatibilist tradition will be simply labeled ‘Reformed.’

<sup>3</sup> Scott Christensen, *What About Free Will?*, (P&R Publishing: Phillipsburg, NJ, 2016), 9. Emphasis mine.

freedom, for God determines not only the occurrence of events but also their mode (free or unfree). Many Thomists, for example, have argued that our actions would indeed be unfree were they the deterministic causal consequences of prior events, that is, were the type of physical determinism championed by most contemporary compatibilists true. Yet God, they insist, can still determine free actions, because no action can occur without God's concurrent activity. Hence, *as* the human agent acts freely, God simultaneously determines its act, thereby safeguarding both human freedom and divine control.<sup>4</sup>

Note the insinuation that Thomistic dual-agency is inherently compatibilistic if God is described as the ultimate cause.

Now to define Libertarian freedom. It seems the great majority of philosophers consider free will a necessary condition for moral praiseworthiness and blameworthiness and a theory of freedom that does not account for moral responsibility can arguably be described as inadequate. Libertarianism is a free will theory that is supposed to provide a robust sense of moral responsibility for the free person. Craig himself subscribes to a particular form of libertarian freedom known as agent-causal libertarianism.<sup>5</sup> According to Randolph Clarke and Justin Capes, under agent-causal libertarianism,

[a]n agent, it is said, is a persisting substance; causation by an agent is causation by such a substance. Since a substance is not the kind of thing

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas P. Flint, "Providence," in *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* 2nd ed., ed. Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper, and Philip L. Quinn. (Blackwell Publishers, 2010). Para 13.  
<http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/bkcpphilrel/providence/0?institutionId=5072>. Emphasis original.

<sup>5</sup> Craig affirms the agent-causal view in a Q&A session with Kevin Harris. See William Lane Craig, "Questions on Molinism, Compatibilism, and Free Will," *Reasonable Faith Podcast*, recorded July 27, 2011, <<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/reasonable-faith-podcast/questions-on-molinism-compatibilism-and-free-will/>>.

that can itself be an effect (though various events involving it can be), on these accounts an agent is in a strict and literal sense an originator of her free decisions, an uncaused cause of them.<sup>6</sup>

Note the term “persisting.” I think what is meant here is that this substance has the power of being in and of itself. Also, note that, according to Clarke and Capes, being an originator and cause necessitates having this power of being and being able to impart such being into the choices. J. P. Moreland seems to agree with this understanding of libertarian freedom as he lists four “basic ideas contained in a theory of libertarian agency.”<sup>7</sup> The first two of these are as follows: “P is a substance that has the active power to bring about e,” and “P exerted power as a first mover (an “originator”) to bring about e.”<sup>8</sup> Here, P represents a person with libertarian free will and e represents a free action. Likewise, Eleonore Stump in her essay, “Augustine on Free Will,” described the second of her conditions for modified libertarianism in this way: “an agent acts with free will, or is morally responsible for an act, only if her own intellect and will are the sole ultimate source or first cause of her act.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Randolph Clarke and Justin Capes, “Incompatibilist (Nondeterministic) Theories of Free Will,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2017 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/incompatibilism-theories/>.

<sup>7</sup> J.P. Moreland, “Naturalism and Libertarian Agency,” *Philosophy & Theology* 10, no. 2 (1997), 353-383.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that in footnote seven on page 143 Stump states the following: “Furthermore, there is a complication which I am leaving to one side here. Insofar as God is the creator of every created thing and insofar as any created cause is always dependent on the operation of divine causality, no created thing can ever be the sole cause of anything or the

God is an agent, the uncaused first cause, and it is in this fact that His sovereign freedom consists. In agent-causal libertarianism so is every human being. Human freedom, per this definition, is arguably *univocal* with divine freedom.

It is important to note that libertarians are not saying that free humans have the ability to create on the grand scope to which God can. Certainly, our free actions do not include things like actualizing universes. I am merely noting that my free act to take a sip of the coffee that I wish were next to me is one that is made *ex nihilo* in the same way that God creates. The difference between the two instances seems to be one of amount or scope of the ability, not so much a difference of the type of freedom.

The last thing to be defined is Molinism itself. Luis Molina was a Jesuit and counter reformer.<sup>10</sup> The purpose of Molinism was to soften the blow of the reformers' strong doctrine of sovereign providence by reconciling God's sovereignty with a Pelagian or Semi-Pelagian understanding of freedom.

Consider the moments (logically) prior to creation. Traditionally, there are

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ultimate first cause of anything. What is at issue for Augustine on free will and grace, however, is whether God is also the cause of the will in some stronger sense than this." Eleonore Stump, "Augustine on Free Will," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*. eds. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Publishers, 2001.), 125.

<sup>10</sup> William L. Craig, "God Directs All Things," in *Four Views on Divine Providence*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers. (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2011), 81.

two moments prior to creation.<sup>11</sup> The first moment is God's knowledge of all logical possibilities or, in other words, possible worlds.<sup>12</sup> God's knowledge of these truths is traditionally said to be located in God's nature.<sup>13</sup> In a sense, this moment represents God as being self-aware. Thus, this moment is often called God's *natural knowledge*. From among these logical possibilities, God freely actualizes a world of His choosing.

God's knowledge that is contingent upon this process of actualization is called God's free knowledge. In order, the moments may appear like something akin to the following: God has a nature. God has knowledge of His own nature including all possible worlds He can actualize (natural knowledge). God freely decrees the actualization of a world according to the possibilities of His own nature. God has knowledge of His own decree (free knowledge).

The disagreement that Molinism has with the above traditional understanding of God's knowledge is that God *strongly* actualizes all things, meaning He directly or mediately causes all things to come about.<sup>14</sup> If this is so, the Molinist reasons, then God is the author of evil. The remedy the Molinist attempts to

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel L. Akin ed., *A Theology for the Church* (B&H Publishing: Nashville, TN, 2014), 568.

<sup>12</sup> William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (E. J. Brill: Leiden, The Netherlands, 1991), 237.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> This is contrasted with the Molinist position that God weakly actualizes all things through free creatures acting in freedom permitting circumstances.



provide, then, is a third moment before creation. This third moment of divine knowledge occurs logically posterior to the *natural knowledge* and logically prior to the *free knowledge*. Hence, the name *Middle Knowledge*.<sup>15</sup>

Where *natural knowledge* is all that is logically possible and *free Knowledge* is all that God actualizes, *middle knowledge* is God's knowledge of all that libertarian free humans would freely do given certain freedom permitting circumstances. It is essentially God's knowledge of true statements in the form "if this freedom permitting circumstance were the case for this person, then this person would act freely in this way." These are commonly called *counterfactuals*. In the Molinist system, God bases His free choice to actualize the world on not only His *natural knowledge* but also His *middle knowledge* of what any free creature would do if he or she were actualized in a particular freedom-permitting circumstance. In other words, *natural* knowledge limits the worlds God can actualize to those that are logically possible, then *middle* knowledge limits the logically possible worlds that God can actualize to those that correspond to the true counterfactuals. (i.e. it is certainly logically possible that I refrain from taking a sip of my coffee, however that particular counterfactual is not a true one and thus any possible worlds in which that counterfactual is true are infeasible for God to actualize.) Thus, God's options to actualize are limited to the possible

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<sup>15</sup> William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, 237.

worlds that correspond to the true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Unnecessary Theory**

If Molinism is to be a working reconciliatory theory, two things are necessary. First, there needs to be a paradox to be reconciled, namely the truth of both libertarian freedom and the sovereign providence of God in all things. If one of these two things to be reconciled were not the case, then there would be no need for Molinism. The second would be the successful reconciliation of the paradox. In this section, the first of the two necessary conditions will be addressed.

The two assertions to be assumed in Molinism as it pertains to divine sovereignty are libertarian freedom and the strong Reformed understanding of divine providence. This section will present arguments to the effect that *rational* libertarian freedom is not the case and, therefore, Molinism is unnecessary because rational behavior is a necessary condition for moral praise and blame.<sup>17</sup>

Suppose a person (call him John) is at the grocery store and chooses to buy steak for dinner. Now for a person to be rational or reasonable in choosing, it seems evident that he must be able to sift through the various options when choosing and pick his choice according to good reasons. However, willfully

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<sup>16</sup> William L. Craig, "God Directs All Things," 82-3.

<sup>17</sup> Rational action seems to be a necessary condition for moral praise and blame. When coming to a verdict concerning a crime this seems very evident. We often find less fault with those experiencing mental illnesses than with those who rationally act criminally and even lessen sentences based on claims of temporary insanity.

arriving at good reasons for the choice made, though necessary, is not a sufficient condition for rationality. It seems that a person must make choices according to what appear to be the best available reasons *consistently* to be considered a rational person.<sup>18</sup> This self-determination may be described as a *natural* ability, but not a *rational* ability to sift through the options freely.<sup>19</sup>

Why did John choose to buy the steak instead of choosing not to? Here it is important to distinguish between the *subjective* reasons for buying the steak, and the *objective* reasons for why John bought the steak.<sup>20</sup> This distinction is a variation of C. S. Lewis' 'looking at versus looking along' distinction in "Meditations in a Toolshed."<sup>21</sup> The subjective reasons will be examined first. Either John had reasons, or he had no reasons for choosing to buy the steak. If he had no reasons, then John has acted merely willfully, not rationally. Suppose John did have reasons. Assuming that John is rational, were the reasons sufficient to

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<sup>18</sup> Notice, it seems that this description has experience to commend it. When we see a person acting unreasonably arbitrarily consistently, we typically describe them as insane, though they seem to retain the ability to sift through the options and make volitional choices.

<sup>19</sup> This distinction between *natural* ability and *rational* ability to sift through options, is a reapplication of Jonathan Edwards' distinction between *natural* ability to do otherwise and *moral* ability to do otherwise. See Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (Yale: United States, 2009), 159-60.

<sup>20</sup> Here, by "subjective" I mean to refer to personal motivations. The water is boiling because I want to make a pot of coffee. By objective I mean the mechanical distinct from personal motivation. The water is boiling because the electrical energy is converted into heat in the stove-coil which heats the pot containing the water that releases impurities at certain temperatures. These could be referred to as the *why* and *how* a choice is made.

<sup>21</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Meditations in a Toolshed," in *God in the Dock*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI: 1970), 212-5.

move him to buy the steak? If so, then determinism seems to be the case. If not, then how are the reasons relevant to his choice?

Suppose that somehow his subjective reasons, although not causal, are still relevant to his choice. Perhaps one could say they *inclined* him without causing him to choose a certain way. But what does the term *incline* indicate? It indicates that *the person* is inclined to choose. Such a situation could no longer be descriptive of an unmoved mover. Hence, we could not be referring to an agent here.

Perhaps one may say that John's reasons are not causal but still relevant because the reasons are necessary for making the choice and not sufficient. Is there a sufficient reason for why John chose to buy the steak? Here the objective reasons are explored. What if John as an agent is sufficient to explain why he bought the steak? This sounds a great deal like Leibniz's "complete individual concept," which is highly necessitarian.<sup>22</sup> What if there were no subjective reason to buy the steak, and John as an agent is simply sufficient for a choice to be made? If John were to just choose on the spot without any greater inclination of

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<sup>22</sup> Leibniz' "complete individual concept" is the theory that all complete individuals, such as Alexander the Great or the coffee mug sitting to my right, are defined by all of their properties including all relational properties. My mug in order to be my mug is sitting on a particular table, made with a particular type of wood, which was gathered from a particular forest, which supports a particular ecosystem at a particular time etc. In sum, all truths of the universe could theoretically be entailed by my coffee mug. If one of these facts were different, this mug would be a different mug. But if this were a different mug than this universe would not be the same universe. If it were the same universe with a different mug, then a contradiction results. Brandon C. Look, "Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2017 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/leibniz/>.

reasons, then it seems he has forfeited his rationality in that instance. Why? As I argued above, choosing according to what appear to be the best reasons is necessary for being a rational or reasonable person. Some have objected that they have experienced a moment of indifference and have still chosen.<sup>23</sup> I must confess, I am not sure I know what they mean. When given the choice between two options and unsure of what to pick, I do not choose. On the contrary, I freeze, often comically, in uncertainty and refer to the advice of others. I know of no situation where I had absolutely no greater reason for my choice, no matter how trivial or obvious the reason.

In conclusion, it seems that agent-causal libertarianism cannot answer the question of why a particular choice is made. Libertarian freedom seems to offer no rational explanation for why a particular choice is made. Thus, it does not seem likely that we can praise or blame the person who acts with libertarian freedom. Therefore, on the above argument Libertarianism is inadequate as a free will theory and, thus, the paradox necessary for Molinism is not the case.

### **The Impossible Picture**

Assuming that there is a real paradox present, the second step to a working theory of Molinism is the process of reconciliation itself. In this section, the goal

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<sup>23</sup> A pertinent question on this objection: assuming I do experience such a libertarian moment, what reason do I have for thinking the kind of freedom I only seem to experience when choosing what to eat or which household appliance to purchase is the necessary condition for being morally culpable?

will be to show that Craig's Molinism does not succeed in its attempted reconciliation by giving two ways in which Craig's Molinism cannot reconcile human autonomy and God's sovereign providence.

First, in "God Directs All Things: On Behalf of a Molinist View of Providence," Craig says in a footnote:

In a Molinist scheme, God does not have middle knowledge of how he himself would freely choose to act in any set of circumstances. For that would obliterate God's freedom, since the truth of such so-called counterfactuals of divine freedom would be prior to and, hence, independent of God's decree.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, in *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, Craig notes that "Molina believed that [middle knowledge concerning decisions of his own will] would rob God of his freedom, presumably because which counterfactuals are true or false does not depend on God's will."<sup>25</sup>

So, what would nullify God's freedom are counterfactuals that are true independent of His free actions. One way for counterfactuals to be independent of free actions is for the counterfactuals to be logically prior to the free actions. But God's middle knowledge includes counterfactuals which are logically prior to and, by Craig's reasoning, independent of the actual world, including all free creaturely acts. Therefore, all 'free' creatures cannot be free. Therefore, Molinism fails as a reconciliatory theory.

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<sup>24</sup> William L. Craig, "God Directs All Things," 82.

<sup>25</sup> William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, 238.

Suppose the Molinist objects to the movement from the divine will to the creaturely will. After all, there is a great difference between God and man. In response, the free will is precisely the best topic for such a comparison to take place. Per the definition given by Clarke and Capes above, agent-causal libertarianism ascribes the power of being an un-moved mover and creating one's choice *ex nihilo*. This seems univocal to the divine free will. Recall that Flint seems to insinuate dual-agency would not be an exception to this. If this similarity between God and men holds, which seems likely, then creaturely freedom would not be possible within the Molinist framework.

Second, consider God's middle knowledge of persons prior to actualization. Craig has suggested that God can know infallibly what any person P will do, just like Craig could know his wife's preferred choice of food in a given situation.<sup>26</sup> Going back to an earlier example, the thing to see is that there is truth to be known about John (our steak shopper) logically prior to his existence. This truth is exhaustive of John's entire life and all John could possibly be. The actual John is defined by the pre-actual John and, therefore, the only variation in what John does or can do is contingent in the circumstance C presented to John. The objection is that pre-actual John is closely akin to Leibniz' "complete individual concept"

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<sup>26</sup> William Lane Craig, "Does God Really Know What I'll Do in the Future?", *Reasonable Faith Podcast*, recorded on April 30, 2016, <<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/reasonable-faith-podcast/does-god-really-know-what-ill-do-in-the-future/>>.

described above with the exception that this notion is a hypothetical circumstantial concept of John as opposed to a set-in-stone concept.

This objection does not rest on causation, for it is not necessary that the concept of John cause John's actions. The point is that John's willing as he does is necessarily the case in any given circumstance. There seems to be a strong necessitarianism present in counterfactual statements.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued that one of Craig's goals is to reconcile libertarian freedom with a strong sense of divine providence via Molinism, and that the necessary conditions for the attainment of this goal are that, first, the above paradox concerning libertarian freedom and a strong sense of divine providence be the case, and second, that the paradox be successfully reconciled.

With the above two necessary conditions in mind, this paper first argued against the adequacy of libertarianism. I attempted to show that either the agent acting with libertarian freedom would be acting irrationally, or that the concept of an agent willing without any particular reason for doing so would be inexplicable and therefore incoherent. Thus, the Libertarian theory of freedom seems inadequate. Second, I argued that libertarian freedom as such would not logically cohere with Craig's Molinism. If either of these independent lines of argumentation is successful, then Craig's Molinism is refuted.



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